

Can A Vegan Diet Stave Off MS?

By Julian Lowy

I reluctantly went on a primarily vegan diet 4 years ago following a transverse myelitis attack. TM is a rare inflammation of the spinal cord, and it left me with a lesion at C5. My attack was hardly the worst – many with TM end up with some form of paralysis, and my attack didn't. I considered myself relatively lucky but, after being informed that 30% of people who experience a TM attack ultimately develop multiple sclerosis, I decided to take further control of any aspect of my health I could. After a lot of research, I decided to try something that treated my body as if it effectively already has MS and committed to the "Overcoming MS" diet (<https://overcomingms.org/recovery-program/diet/what-eat-not-eat>). It seemed counterintuitive at the time since I don't have MS, but my gut instinct was to go for it.

I didn't gradually onload the diet – I switched immediately, overnight. Within a few days most of the fatigue I'd developed subsequent to the TM attack began to recede, and my energy level went up. Initially I assumed this was a placebo effect yet, over 4 years later, the positive shift in energy hasn't wavered. And the diet has had other health problems thrown at it along the way, but its positive effect on my energy remains solid. Can a placebo effect last for years, even with additional health disruption? Doubtful. And I still don't have MS, the primary goal of the diet. I have, however, developed significant cervical spinal instability related to a separate Ehlers-Danlos diagnosis, but I don't believe the diet caused this as I was born with EDS. I tested positive for Lyme and Babesia at Quest, but my presentation of symptoms is unusual. If anything, I think a vegan diet has helped keep the damage to my connective tissue from EDS and Lyme from becoming completely unmanageable.

Even in the throes of a spinal problem now arguably more serious than TM, my energy level remains fairly high. I wonder if the accumulated 4 years of the "Overcoming MS" diet – extremely little-to-no saturated fat, as little sugar as possible, vegan save for fish a couple times per week – has helped to throw off some of the inflammatory effects of the results my EDS-damaged faulty connective tissue has wrought.

When I first started the diet, I viewed a primarily vegan meal plan as essentially being how it's currently promoted in the US as its trendiness grows. Imitation meat, lots of salad, pasta, bread, fruit, etc. Yet, after playing around with it in the first year, I realized the meals I actually enjoyed eating were mostly Asian-inspired. I realized I don't like fruit at all, bread made me tired, the chewing required to eat salad would often mess up my jaw, and imitation meat has stuff in it that's worse than eating the real thing. Yet, whenever I threw together some tofu, broccoli, brown rice and miso soup, I felt great.

Four years later, I effectively eat an almost entirely Asian diet. In the first couple years I'd occasionally crave chicken or steak but, as time has gone on, I've shed almost any appetite for animal food. Since the diet does require some fish, once or twice a week I'll try and eat some shrimp, but any other fish has become virtually inedible. Will this be okay long-term? Who knows. But it makes me feel as well as I can imagine in the throes of a variety of injuries EDS has caused. And its underlying goal – staving off MS – seems to be happening with flying colors.

When Sheila opened She She's Bakery, I was initially skeptical to place an order as one of the major discoveries on this diet was realizing baked goods usually leave me exhausted. But I reluctantly placed

an order and was shocked to discover that the singular alchemy of care, ingredients and ingenuity she's woven together has resulted in fun baked treats I can eat and keep my energy level fairly high. I only wish she could figure out some way to make healthy fortune cookies! My "Asian" diet is basically a vegan riff on the American Chinese restaurant, so they'd fit right in. In the meantime, though, She She's magical creations are more than enough.

Everyone in the world is different, obviously. There's no magic diet that works perfectly across the rich spectrum of humanity. I might end up regretting the diet for some reason yet to reveal itself. Or maybe it's saved my life and effectively suppressed the chance of developing MS. Despite the successes of modern medicine, at heart it's ultimately an industrial assembly line. And the rarer your conditions are – spinal damage caused by EDS being a prime example – the more likely you fall between specialties, straight through the cracks. A primarily vegan diet, at least in my case, seems to have established a baseline level of health that's kept my energy high enough to always be well enough to self-advocate, research, and remain optimistic.

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